CLOSE TO HOME

At last, help for parents who rarely get a chance to talk to each other.

Group Warns About the Perils of Playgrounds

But Park Supervisor Claims Areas in Salt Lake Are Safe

BY NANCY HOBBS
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

With Salt Lake City's Liberty Park as a backdrop, members of a consumer advocacy group Thursday issued a warning and launched an awareness campaign about hidden dangers at public playgrounds.

They asked parents, school administrators and preschool teachers to learn the components of safe play areas and report problem equipment and surroundings at public playgrounds to state and local officials.

"Public playgrounds can be a fantastic place for children to have fun and explore. Unfortunately, too many playgrounds around the nation contain hidden dangers which have been the cause of serious injuries and even death," said Jen Spires, a consumer advocate for the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (U.S. PIRG) in Salt Lake City.

Spires said she staged her news conference at Liberty Park because it flouts many of the safety standards set by the Washington, D.C.-based Consumer Federation of America (CFA). Those standards call for impact-absorbing, loose-fill surfaces, like sand or wood chips, with a minimum depth of 9 inches beneath equipment.

The sand beneath slides and swings at Salt Lake City's largest park is no more than 2 inches deep, Spires said.

Also, one swing set at Liberty Park has a ladder that enables children to climb to the top rail of the triangular structure — a height of 12 feet.

"That's a serious fall for anyone, especially a small child," Spires said. CFA recommends a maximum height of six feet for school-age children, four feet for preschoolers.

Tim Kelly/The Salt Lake Tribune

Eric Lewis gives Taylor Moore, 2, his girlfriend's daughter, a push on the swings at Liberty Park playground.

But Val Pope, Salt Lake City's park maintenance supervisor, adamantly disagreed with the consumer group's declaration that Liberty Park's playground, or any other playground in the city, exposes children to hidden perils.

"The playgrounds in Salt Lake City are extraordinarily safe," he said.

Rounds of all the city parks are made weekly, with workers ordering repairs of anything that may pose a hazard, such as sharp, exposed edges on equipment, whether hooks on swings are clamped tight, and if equipment is satisfactorily painted.

"We even look for dead-wood 'tree hangers' above the play area" so they can be cut down, Pope said.

Spires acknowledged that the only park surveyed by the group was Liberty, "because it's the biggest park, and gets the most use."

She quoted an employee of Salt Lake County Parks and Recreation as reporting that 97% of the county's parks meet safety codes.

However, that's another concern Pope has with the U.S. PIRG allegations. There is no single, nationally recognized set of playground safety standards, he said. The city uses standards established by several different organizations to set the guidelines.

"So if you read one book, you may be in compliance, but if you read the other, you're not," he said.

Accidents at the park are few, and even the one or two that have occurred in the past two years were the result of children running into equipment, not when they were using it. Nationally, the Consumer Product Safety Commission reports much higher numbers: 150,000 injuries annually requiring emergency-room attention, and an annual average of 15 deaths of children in playground-related accidents.

Safety concerns did lead to the removal of an oversized slide from Liberty Park a couple of years ago, Pope said.

Eric Lewis remembers that slide and has the scars to remind him should he ever forget.

"I grew up in this park, and went home with many a bruise and scratches," he said.

Now, pushing his girlfriend's daughter in a park swing, he agreed that maybe some of the park's old equipment should be updated. But the sand felt awfully soft and cool, he said as 2-year-old Taylor Moore looked up to the sky and squealed with delight.

According to U.S. PIRG's evaluation, the swings are the one thing at Liberty that pass CFA muster.

"The swing separation, the space between swings, is the only thing that meets [CFA] code," Spires said.

Parents are encouraged by the group to make safety evaluations on their own, and report problems to the appropriate department. U.S. PIRG offers a parent checklist at its Salt Lake office, 2164 S. Highland Drive, or by calling 484-1406.

FOR THE RECORD

SHOOTING SUSPECTS CHARGED

Two suspected gang members were charged Thursday with firing 29 rounds at a Salt Lake City Maverik gas station May 27, wounding a rival gang member. Clinton Dimell Randle, 19, and Arick Ron Davenport, 20, each were charged with two counts of attempted criminal homicide and four counts of aggravated assault. Prosecutors allege that Randle and Davenport were in a car with two other gangsters when they fired at the rival gang member in the gas-station parking lot. Celestino Torrez was shot in the neck. Randle was arrested Tuesday. Davenport was still on the lam Thursday. Police also were looking for the two other gang members in the car.

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JUDGE SENTENCES TEEN

David Archuleta, who beat and kicked Michael Early to the brink of death in an Ogden motel room, was sentenced Wednesday to concurrent sentences of 1 to 15 years for second-degree murder. Judge Michael Lyon also sentenced Archuleta to 5 years to life on an aggravated-robbery charge. Archuleta's girlfriend, Maxine Rios, testified the beating went on for up to 20 minutes. Early was still alive when the couple left the "drinking party" but died of suffocation sometime during the night due to injury-related swelling of the trachea.

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HOUSE FIRE

Fire caused $120,000 in damage to an Orem home Wednesday. Orem police Lt. Mike Larsen also said three vehicles, including a pickup truck, were consumed. Firefighters from Orem's three fire stations and from a Provo fire station responded to the 4:30 p.m. call to the home at 415 E. 2000 South. The residence is located on the Provo-Orem boundary. No one was home at the time. A 5-year-old boy playing with a cigarette lighter and some boxes is believed to have caused the fire, which spread from the boxes to the home.

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HIGH ROLLER?

Ronald Fisher of Sundance has been indicted on bank fraud and other federal charges stemming from a check-kiting scheme involving $1.5 million. Fisher played the part of a high-roller — boasting of a $30,000 month salary, flashy cars, expensive real estate and airplanes — to impress officers, banks and credit unions. But, the indictment says, he "had no significant assets, aside from those that he was able to obtain through fraud." He apparently tried to charm bank officers with airplane rides and other exhibitions of affluence so they would approve his checks. The financial institutions involved were U.S. Bank, First Interstate Bank and two credit unions.

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WANTS IT DISMISSED

Attorneys for the Ute Indian Tribe have asked U.S. District Judge David Winder to dismiss a property-rights lawsuit brought by so-called "mixed bloods." The lawsuit focuses on an attempt by the Ute Distribution Corp. to assert a right of joint management over disputed property assets, including water, that were allocated when mixed-blood Utes lost tribe membership in 1954. The UDC contends the Partition Act, as the original distribution blueprint was called, provided the mixed-blood group with a share of divisible tribal assets, along with a 27% claim to nondivisible assets, including water. But tribal attorney Robert S. Thompson has asked the judge to dismiss the lawsuit on grounds administrative channels have not been exhausted, the statute of limitations has expired, and because the tribe had immunity from the litigation.

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HEAD-ON

Colleen Denise Ewin, 18, Spanish Fork, died shortly after 12 a.m. Thursday when a semi-tractor trailer northbound on Interstate 15 drifted across the median into her southbound lane and struck her vehicle head-on, Jose Antonio Castro, 45, Perris, Calif., driver of the semi, was taken to Utah Valley Regional Medical Center with minor injuries, the Utah Highway Patrol said. The accident occurred south of the South University Interchange, near Provo.

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KILLED IN FALL

John Wilson, a 21-year-old Salt Lake County man, was killed during a hike in Big Cottonwood Canyon Thursday afternoon when he fell about 50 feet and landed on his head, said sheriff's Lt. Kevin Taylor. The man was declared dead at the scene.

Sandy Taxpayers May See Cut

BY JON URE
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

SANDY — The budget ax won't chop their property taxes this year, but residents probably will see reduced utility franchise taxes when the City Council approves a $30 million budget Tuesday.

Mayor Tom Dolan and City Council head George McNeill say that more cuts are likely next year, including property taxes. But this year, the franchise-tax cut plus income-tax breaks on property taxes will amount to bigger savings for taxpayers than would reduced property taxes.

For a year officials have promised tax relief as the city grows richer. A plan to cut from 6% to 5.8% in gas, electric and phone bills roughly translates to a total of $75,000. Sandy won't require of its taxpayers. A 1% drop in property taxes would have cut out only about $45,000, McNeill said.

"The citizens have paid some heavy taxes for many years in Sandy," McNeill said. "We are now developing our commercial- and sales-tax base and we'd like to give them a little bit back."

The city will charge $6 per household for its street lighting this year. It will also increase its reserve fund — state law mandates that cities keep from 6% to 17% of their budgets for emergency contingencies.

Still, "we've got tax decreases on the mind now," Dolan said, and about $20,000 will be cut from city travel budgets.

The city's budget last year was about $30 million, and officials said increasing sales-tax receipts have sparked some long-term measures that should sit well with the city's 90,000 residents. Since the November elections, city officials have predicted tax or fee cuts — possibly both — in the budget year beginning July 1.

In the next five years, the city hopes to reduce the franchise tax to 5%.

Dolan said the new budget, with some federal help, allows for hiring 10 new police officers and three new firefighters. Also, the city's arts fund will get more as will parks and recreation.

Bless the Lives of Others, EchoHawk Urges Graduates

BY PHIL MUELLER
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

BLANDING — Brigham Young University law Professor Larry EchoHawk challenged the 74 graduates of the San Juan Center of the College of Eastern Utah in Blanding to "continue your education lifelong."

"Add to that education what you have learned within the walls of your own home. . . . Your spiritual values that have been taught by your parents and your mentors and the values of hard work and service," said the former Idaho Attorney General, a member of the Pawnee Indian Tribe, continued.

"Use your education to bless the lives of those around you," EchoHawk told the CEU San Juan Center grads, over 50 percent of whom are American-Indian (Mostly Navajo and Ute Mountain tribal members).

Sixty one of those graduating received Associate of Science or Arts degrees. Twelve also received practical nursing certificates, many of those students plan to continue in the registered-nurse education program next term at the Blanding Campus.

The CEU Blanding Campus also awarded an Honorary Doctorate to Navajo Mountain Utah Medicine Man, Buck Navajo. Navajo, who has worked closely for development of education improvements for his people with the San Juan School District and C.E.U. for five decades, has never had a formal education.

Speaking in Navajo, the medicine man strongly encouraged CEU graduates to continue their education. "The more education you take upon yourself the more wisdom you will have. Education never stops."

Court Rejects Wife Beater's Appeal

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Utah Court of Appeals has rejected a Salt Lake man's challenge of his prison sentence for beating his estranged wife unconscious with a snow shovel.

In a decision released Thursday, the court rejected Patrick Williams' argument that prosecutors failed to keep their part of a plea bargain.

Third District Judge Homer Wilkinson ordered Patrick Williams to serve up to 5 years for aggravated assault, and tacked on another term of up to 5 years for witness tampering.

Prosecutors said Williams had called his wife from jail after the attack, pleading with her not to testify and then threatening her. Wilkinson added a concurrent 1-year sentence for Williams' violation of a protection order. The Feb. 23, 1994, attack on Kerri Floyd came after the defendant had been ordered out of his home under the order, which had been issued because of complaints of earlier beatings.

Williams contended his deal with prosecutors was that he be committed to Utah State Hospital rather than go to prison.

But the appellate court's memorandum decision found that the plea bargain contained a precondition that Williams could be committed "if deemed appropriate, pursuant to the evaluation at Utah State Hospital." Evaluators determined Williams could get adequate treatment in prison. Furthermore, Williams had been repeatedly advised that the trial judge was not required to follow sentencing recommendations.

Wart Hogs Named for Odd Couple

Hogle Zoo's new wart hogs are quite the couple. And now they bear the names of "The Odd Couple" characters of movie and television fame — Felix and Oscar.

The names were selected Saturday from more than 12,000 entries to the zoo's "Help Us Name Pumbaa's Pals" contest. Pumbaa is the wart hog in the movie *The Lion King*.

The winning entry was submitted by Shelbi Burgon, 3, of West Jordan. Felix and Oscar, who are 2 years old, will be displayed at the zoo through Sept. 14.

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